

Sermon for Sunday, August 6, 2017
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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Today
is the feast of the Transfiguration,
one of the major feasts of the church year
 although we only celebrate it on a Sunday
when August 6 falls on a Sunday.
Most of the time it passes almost without us noticing.
But we do hear this story every year,
not in August,
but on the last Sunday
before Lent begins,
where it helps prepare us for Lent
and Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem.

One of the struggles of being a preacher
is wondering what to say about a text
that you've already preached on once this year,
along with every other year.

But this year
a friend posted an article on Facebook
that raised a great question.
Did you notice what happened in this story
with Peter?

We normally think of Peter
as the kind of comedy act in the story of Jesus.
He bumbles around
saying exactly what is on his mind without any filters.
And what happens most often
is that he gets himself in trouble.

He's the one
in the story we'll read next week,
when the disciples are out in a boat, and see Jesus walking towards them,
and Peter yells out, "Lord, can I come to you?"
And he leaps out and begins walking toward Jesus,

and then gets afraid and begins to sink.
And Jesus has to rescue him.

And asks Jesus how many times he should forgive someone.
“As many as seven times?”
“No, Peter, forgive so many times that you lose count.”

He’s the one, who when Jesus goes to wash the disciples’ feet,
says, “No, Lord, it’s not right. You can’t wash my feet.”
“Peter, unless you let me do this, you won’t have a place in my kingdom.”

And of course, he’s the one who declares with great passion
the night that Jesus is betrayed
that he will never deny his Lord.
And then, early the next morning,
when Jesus is being examined by the high priest,
Peter three times
denies knowing him.

And so when we read the story of the transfiguration
and hear Peter saying,
“Master...let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah,”
we automatically assume
that Peter has got it wrong.
Once again.

Except,
look at what happens.
Jesus doesn’t say anything to Peter.
There’s no rebuke, no correction.
Maybe, maybe this time
Peter didn’t get it wrong.
Maybe
he got it right.

Peter sees that what is happening is good,
that somehow,
whatever it is,
Jesus has been transformed by this conversation with Moses and Elijah,
and so he searches within his own mind and experience

how to prolong it.
Because he knows how hard
the last days and weeks have been for Jesus,
constantly surrounded by crowds,
barely a chance to catch his breath
let alone
have time for prayer.

And probably Peter's mind
is going back to the stories he first heard as a little boy,
of Moses going up Mount Sinai to meet with God,
and coming back
 with his face shining,
and Elijah, traveling forty days and forty nights
 to hide in a cave on Mount Horeb
because the king was determined to kill him,
and there meeting God
in a still, small voice.
Maybe there is something in that
forty days and forty nights;
maybe Jesus will need to stay there
up on the mountain,
just like Moses and Elijah.

What is happening is good;
Jesus is glowing.
And Peter wants to make it last.

And probably not just for Jesus.
Because he has never seen anything like it before.
He is seeing Jesus
in glory.
His is catching
a glimpse
of God.

And maybe if Jesus stayed longer there,
so could he,
and more fully experience
the glory of God.

Peter blurts out

““Master, let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

But Jesus

doesn't answer;

Jesus

has no time to answer.

Because right then

a cloud swallows them all,

like the cloud that swallowed Moses on Mount Sinai,

and there is a voice,

“This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”

And then the cloud lifts

and Moses and Elijah are gone,

and it's just Jesus,

and the three disciples,

Peter, James, and John.

And they go back down the mountain,

back to the other disciples,

back to the crowds,

back to the incessant demands.

And they don't talk

about what happened. Not then.

But something has changed.

Jesus is different.

As the gospel of Luke tells it

he now sets his face towards Jerusalem,

sets his face towards death.

After this

Jesus is unambiguously heading

toward the cross.

And Peter?

Well Peter

is still clueless.

A couple of chapters later
he's asking the dumb questions
that everyone thinks
but no-one dares say.

And then it's on to the last supper
and him protesting Jesus washing his feet,
then falling asleep in the garden
while Jesus prays,
then the denial,
and finally the cross.
Where as far as we can tell
Peter
doesn't even
show up.

It's not until
early that first Easter morning
when Peter rushes to the tomb
that we begin to see a difference.
That he begins to be
not the bumbling fearful comedy act
but the person that Jesus had renamed him,
from Simon the fisherman to Peter the rock
on which Jesus
would build his church.

And perhaps it's no coincidence
that the way the story of the transfiguration is told,
Peter and James and John didn't tell anyone what they had seen,
not then,
but later,
after the resurrection.
Because then, then they understand
that what they had seen
was a foretaste of Jesus
in all his risen glory.
And it has transformed them.
Not instantly,
no dramatic change of heart or mind or character

but a gradual slow building
to knowing Jesus in all his fullness,
and then
with his resurrection,
it's like everything that has gone before
clicks into place.

And Peter
who is shivering by the fire outside Jesus' trial
claiming he doesn't know him,
is the same Peter
who just a month and a half later
preaches to the crowds in Jerusalem
on the day of Pentecost,
and builds a new community of people
that becomes what we know as
the church.

And Peter, who by tradition wrote the letter that we read from in our Epistle today,
testifying to the Savior
 he had come to know.

That's Peter.
So what about us?
One of the struggles we have
with the story of Jesus' transfiguration
is that there is no immediate payoff.
They go up the mountain.
They come back.
They don't tell anyone.
Nothing seems to change,
other than Jesus
seems reconciled
to heading toward Jerusalem
and his death.
But he didn't need the disciples there
for that to happen.
So what about them?

I wonder
I wonder if perhaps

the fact that nothing really changed for Peter,
and James and John,
is exactly
what this is all about.

The phrase “mountain top experience”
has passed into our language,
And by it we mean
something dramatic,
a moment of transcendence,
a revelation by God.
Something
that you are reluctant to leave.
Something
that changes your life.

But while this may have been all of those things,
at least in theory,
in practice
it was just another day with Jesus.
It took months, even years
to sink in,
for the disciples
and particularly Peter
to make sense of it.
It was part of what changed his life,
but only part.

We often think
when we read the bible
that dramatic experiences of God are the norm,
that anyone who is a true follower
will experience them.
But the reality is
that they are the exception,
and even when they do happen
they are part of a bigger picture
of following Jesus
day by day.
And it often takes years of reflection

for those who experience them
to even recognize them.

After all, if Peter, who got to hang out with Jesus full time for three years
took so long to process this,
to incorporate it into his understanding of who Jesus was,
we can't expect
that we are likely to find it any easier.
And indeed
it's entirely possible
that we've received moments where God has revealed himself to us
and we haven't even noticed.
And it's not until later
that we look back
and recognize them.

But - and here's the important but -
in order to notice them
we have to be paying attention to Jesus.
If Peter had stayed up the mountain
when Jesus left,
he would have lost the experience
and lost Jesus.
If he had walked back down the mountain
and because he hadn't really understood what he'd seen,
had gone back to his fishing boat,
then he wouldn't never have come to his understanding of what that event meant,
of who Jesus truly was.
It took continuing to stay with Jesus, one way or another,
sometimes falteringly,
following him around, doing what he said,
participating in christ's mission,
it took all that for Peter
to come to be the person that we know
as one of the great leaders in faith.

And if nothing else this feast of the transfiguration,
know this.
We are the same.
Jesus comes to us,

and calls us to follow him.
Not just once
but time and time again.
And sometimes,
sometimes
we may not even know it.
We may see something
we don't quite understand
and blurt out something
without quite getting it.
We may think that the only place we can see Jesus
is in a holy place
and want to stay there
but Christ calls us to follow him,
to follow him
from the mountain top holy place
into the ordinary world that we live in
where we may not even be able to articulate
how it is that we have seen God
but where our lives are slowly, surely
shaped
into the image of our savior,
and we go on to serve him
with gladness
and fullness of heart.